



## *Sir Thomas Browne Against Error: An Apology for Complexity*

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The “People”, writes Thomas Browne in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, are “the most deceptable part of Mankind and ready with open armes to receive the encroachments of Error” (Browne 1964: 25).<sup>1</sup> They are exposed unto error because their intellect is unequal to the task of discerning the truth; their “uncultivated understandings” cannot distinguish true tenets from false and are prevailed upon by sensations, which hold sway because the People’s weak reason is incapable of judging things correctly. In the first book of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, Browne makes clear what he means by “People”:

[...] the greater part of Mankind [who] having but one eye of Sense and Reason, conceive the Earth far bigger than the Sun, the fixed Stars lesser than the Moon, their figures plain, and their spaces from Earth equidistant. For thus their Sense informeth them, and herein their reason cannot Rectifie them; and therefore hopelessly continuing in mistakes, they live and die in their absurdities; passing their days in perverted apprehensions, and conceptions of the World, derogatory unto God, and the wisdom of the Creation. (Browne 1964: 26)

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: or Enquiries into very many received Tenents, and commonly presumed Truths* (London, first edition 1646). All quotations are taken from *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, Vol. II, edited by Geoffrey Keynes, Faber & Faber Limited, London, 1964. There were six editions of Browne’s treatise during his lifetime (the first, in 1646, was revised and enlarged from 1650 to 1672). Keynes bases his edition on the last version of the text revised by Browne in 1672.



*Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, Browne's comprehensive inquiry into "Vulgar and Common Errors", was not devised to enlighten the People and rectify their mistakes; Browne did not believe in the possibility of reforming the "vulgar sort" – as Francis Bacon had called uncultivated minds in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605: 18 – sig. E3)<sup>2</sup> – by providing a tool to avoid epistemological aberrations. The People are beyond reformation: not only dominated by sensations, they are led by their appetite (Browne 1964: 27); if, taken individually, they are no less than "monstrous" in their determinations, it is no wonder that, once grouped together in a multitude, "they will be Error it self" (1964: 28).

Browne therefore addresses his treatise "to the knowing and leading part of Learning" (1964: 5, epistle to the reader), aiming explicitly above the heads of the vulgar. *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* is a long dissertation on the human propensity to the misapprehension of reality, which is both innate (a consequence of the Fall) and the fruit of an erroneous approach to knowledge. The work is divided into seven books, which constitute a sort of encyclopedia of mistaken conceptions about the world: the first book investigates the two main causes of error – "the common infirmity of humane nature" and "the erroneous disposition of the people" (1964: 7) – whilst the others focus on specific fields of knowledge and discuss received tenets concerning minerals, plants, animals and humans, examined in ascending order according to the great chain of being. Browne also deals with false tenets deriving from pictures and emblems, with popular customs and practices, with erroneous opinions concerning history and geography, and finally, in the seventh book, with "many historical Tenets generally received, and some deduced from the History of holy Scripture" (1964: 14).

Despite the general structure of the treatise, which shows a tendency to an orderly classification of the several kinds of errors that hinder human understanding, the result is a miscellaneous work, inevitably incomplete but also patently incongruous according to the modern conception of taxonomy, whose roots can be traced back to the eighteenth century. As we see it, more than systematically scrutinizing his field, Browne seems rather to pick and choose somewhat at random from the immense field of erroneous opinions. He devotes the same scrupulous attention to crucial tenets regarding human beings – their fallacious nature, their sublime thoughts and speculative faculty – as he does to issues we would consider futile, ridiculous, and even offensive, like discussing the opinion that "the Jews stink naturally" (Book IV, chapter 10), or trying to ascertain whether "a Toad pisseth, and this way diffuseth its venome" (Book III, chapter 13).

The apparent distance of a work like *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* from our literary practices and, even more obviously, from our frame of mind, is paradoxically the most important feature that renders it a precious object of study today, apart from a pleasurable read, more gratifying than one would think. Part of the excitement shared

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<sup>2</sup> On Browne's debt to Francis Bacon there is ample bibliography. Among others, see Dodds (2006: 228) on "*Pseudodoxia Epidemica* [as] an extended meditation on and reconsideration of Bacon's 'idols of the tribe'"; see also Mori (2015: 371-375) on the same subject and on Browne's 'Baconian' attitude towards the authority of ancient literary sources.



by modern readers<sup>3</sup> originates from the experience of a journey into the unknown, where the strongest feeling of alterity stems from an alien methodology of inquiry, more than from the actual issues debated (despite their undeniable peculiarity) and the conclusions drawn. And since our pleasure, in meeting alterity, derives not only from the apprehension of differences, but also from the recognition of similarities, Browne's work is satisfactory even as a 'modern' text. Actually, *Pseudodoxia* appears deeply in tune with the epistemological uncertainty of our times as soon as we perceive the underlying, constant feature of investigation: a complex, relativising and even dubitative approach to all things human.

The conviction that simplifying things does not help to understand them pervades Browne's inquiries: since reality, composed by countless interwoven elements, is complex,<sup>4</sup> a correct epistemological attitude should respect that complexity and try to avoid both containing the discourse of knowledge in a single strain of thought, and expressing it in a reduced, programmatically plain language. Positioned in the middle of a century that starts with Francis Bacon's writings on natural philosophy and ends with Isaac Newton's, Thomas Browne endorses the idea that uncritical acceptance of received notions about the world hinders the advancement of learning; at the same time, though, a rigidly straight path – a unique, simplified method to decipher reality – equally perverts knowledge and is the source of misapprehension and mystification. Given the richness (and the bulk) of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, these few pages can only hint at some aspects of the question, namely those anticipated in the title that defines Browne's inquiry into vulgar errors as (also) an apology for complexity. Building on recent studies on Browne's style and his connection with a culturally and politically convulsed historical period,<sup>5</sup> I will highlight exemplary passages in which he gives voice to one of his greatest fears, that is, the human tendency to simplify what is complex, thus reducing the interpretation of notions, signs and phenomena to a one-sided and necessarily inadequate undertaking.

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<sup>3</sup> Among twenty-first-century writers who were inspired and fascinated by Sir Thomas Browne and his work, see Barnes *et al.* (2012) and Aldersey-Williams (2015).

<sup>4</sup> I use *complexity* and *complex* (adj.) in the sense of "formed by the combination of interconnected parts". As far as *complex* is concerned, the above meaning can be traced back to the mid-seventeenth century (see the *Oxford English Dictionary* under *complex* adj., n. 1: "consisting of or comprehending various parts united or connected together"). The noun *complexity* in the sense of "composite nature or structure" is not attested in the English language until 1734 (see OED under *complexity*, n. 1).

<sup>5</sup> Browne's elaborate style is the focus of past and present research. Recent contributions include Preston (2005), Dodds (2006), Fleming (2007), and Seelig (2008) (who undertakes an examination of the repertory of styles employed by Browne in his works). In more general terms, two valuable collections of essays on Browne and his work were issued in 2008: Murphy and Todd's, and Barbour and Preston's (who provide a bibliographical survey on the fortune of Browne's studies in their introduction to the volume). Killeen (2009) is an extended study on Thomas Browne's work in the context of mid-seventeenth-century culture and politics. In 2013 Reid Barbour published a biography of Sir Thomas Browne.



Far from attempting to construct an image of Browne as a champion of epistemological relativism *ante litteram*, what I mean to do here is twofold: firstly, I propose to discuss his general attitude towards knowledge acquisition as it emerges from *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*; secondly, I will show how it shapes the structure and tone of the various chapters through a few examples, in which the author is clearly struggling not only against false opinions, but also against a simplifying tendency of the human mind. I have chosen the term 'human' instead of 'vulgar' or 'popular' mind on purpose, because the definition of who the erroneous people are is the first to be problematized. It is true that Browne's inquiry overtly regards "vulgar and common errors", but in the first Book he takes the 'endemic' infirmity of human nature into consideration, and makes clear that the "wiser" are also subject to "misapprehension, fallacy or false deduction, credulity, supinity, adherence unto Antiquity, Tradition and Authority" (1964: 7).<sup>6</sup> To be able to read ancient and modern authorities as sources of knowledge is not enough: if the vulgar sort, in their ignorance, are liable to all kinds of interpretative mistakes derived from fables, parables, and pictures – taken for true early in life and never questioned – the learned cannot consider themselves safe from false conceits. For all their wisdom, if they do not acquire a method to validate their knowledge they will persist in their mistakes and contribute to propagating them by means of their own writings – a 'method' which is, in itself, the very negation of simplicity. A necessarily brief remark on the political implications of *Pseudodoxia* – which was published in 1646, during the English civil wars – will bring this contribution to an end. Far from endorsing the traditional picture of a secluded scholar, basically disinterested in the political turmoil that was shattering his country, the recent critical debate on Browne has highlighted the connection between his epistemological concerns and the issues that fueled the ideological debate of the English Revolution, as we shall see presently.

Throughout *Pseudodoxia*, Browne suggests that the path towards the apprehension of truth is complex – that is, formed by the combination of different elements: authority, reason, and sense (sensation) must all be taken into consideration when investigating a phenomenon or a received idea. Mainly, his inquiries into the most disparate kinds of errors are built on manifold operations: the perusal of ancient and modern authors both in favour and against the erroneous belief under scrutiny; a discussion of its reasonableness – often based on a comparison between the false notion and the totality of similar phenomena; the analysis of the probable origins of the specific error, which often implies going back to the etymology of the term and to its "hieroglyphical", mythological, or Biblical inception; lastly, when possible, experiment, either his own or made by others.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On the question of Browne's erroneous "People", see Bennet (1962: 133-134), Seelig (2008: 13), and Killeen (2009: 12): "Repeatedly, it turns out that the vulgar errors are not in fact vulgar, that indeed, the vulgar serve as something of an alibi to discuss entirely scholarly questions".

<sup>7</sup> Bennet (1962: 159) exposes Browne's method of inquiry schematically: "Browne was aware of three possible ways of arriving at the truth about phenomena: one could inquire what the books say (authority); one could consider probability (reason); or, in some cases, one could test by one's own



Browne's use of the English language is similarly complex: his style has been defined as "not in the vanguard" (Bennet 1962: 128), since he never conformed to the plain style fashion which was progressively becoming dominant in natural philosophy and established itself after the Restoration, in the literary production of the Royal Society.<sup>8</sup> Browne's is, in Lara Dodd's words, a "rich, allusive style that is far from transparent" (2006: 223); Sharon Seelig explores the syntax of several passages from *Pseudodoxia* and suggests that it "conveys the weighing of alternatives and the complexity of the intellectual and emotional tasks involved" (2008: 23). Nonetheless, Browne's resonant and Latinate prose – the "conscious art" of writing displayed by a man who "was formed in the 1630's" (Bennet 1962: 128) – combines with simpler passages which, lexically and syntactically, correspond to the kind of style that was to assert itself by the end of the century.

Browne himself was keenly aware of the non-transparent nature of human language. In Book I, chapter 4, he explores the verbal fallacies that pervert knowledge through deception; he discusses two of them in particular, "that is the fallacy of Equivocation and Amphibology which conclude from the ambiguity of some one word, or the ambiguous Syntaxis of many put together" (1964: 32). Browne's deep interest in errors derived from the polysemic nature of language is pivotal to understanding his commitment to a complex approach to knowledge: too many erroneous beliefs are the consequence of faulty interpretative practices, as when men receive truths in a different sense from the one intended, "converting Metaphors into proprieties, and receiving as literal expressions, obscure and involved truths" (1964: 32). Actually, the dangers stemming from a fallacious reading of received knowledge is a pervasive topic of discussion throughout *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. As we shall see in the examples below, "all deductions from Metaphors, Parables, Allegories, unto real and rigid interpretations" (1964: 34) are destined to breed hermeneutic aberrations, which, far from being innocuous (albeit erroneous) fables about the world, corrupt knowledge as well as religious, political and social practices.

The recent critical production dealing with Browne's work has highlighted the importance of his pervasive concern with his contemporaries' interpretative habits and abilities. Lara Dodds claims that a good number of chapters in *Pseudodoxia* deal with "some kind of misreading" (2006: 227), and that the treatise provides "a sophisticated lesson in how to read" (222). She underlines Browne's complex approach to the cultural aspects of language by pointing out his awareness "that the boundary between literal and metaphorical uses of language is not universal or absolute, but a result of shared practices of reading (and misreading)" (224). Kevin Killeen maintains that "a central imperative in *Pseudodoxia* [is] to locate corrupt hermeneutic practice as the root of error" (2009: 7). He implicitly endorses the idea of Browne's defence of

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senses (experiment). [...] Browne keeps all three in play as far as is appropriate or possible". See also Mori (2015: 379-382).

<sup>8</sup> Lara Dodds quotes Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (first edition 1667), in which he "describes a resolution to reject 'all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style' in favor of a 'close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness.'" (Dodds 2006: 223).





complexity when he argues that “More sophisticated hermeneutic strategies, paying attention to secondary levels of intended meaning would, Browne suggests, rectify errors across the vast subject range he takes for his province” (2009: 15).

Simplifying language, therefore, to render it more rational and exact, does not seem to be the solution envisaged by Thomas Browne in order to avoid the birth of erroneous beliefs in the mind of man. The century in which he lived produced an outstanding philosophical debate on the origin, status, and functions of human communication, together with projects devised to create rational (and therefore universal) languages meant to allow a clear, unambiguous cultural exchange amongst the learned for the advancement of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Browne recognizes that if young wits could be educated avoiding “vain and idle fictions”, and relying instead only on “impressions from realities”, which are solid foundations of learning, their knowledge of the world would definitely profit from the bargain (see Book I, chapter 9, 1964: 62). And yet, given the richness of a literary tradition which is both an inexhaustible source of knowledge and an inevitable hindrance to flawless learning, Browne opts for the difficult but necessary task of trying to refine, to render more complex and more sophisticated, the way in which his fellow countrymen carry out their ‘reading’ of both literary sources and the world. He recognises the impossibility of eliminating, once and for all, the multiple shades of meaning that characterise human language and engender ambiguity and equivocation. The only path to avoid the cauldron of error is a cooperative and cautious search for the truth, which implies a thorough study of received notions *and* their close examination – a procedure which enhances both the literary tradition and its rational scrutiny.

Browne hints at the need for cooperation in the search for truth at the very beginning of his treatise, in the epistle to the reader. He craves pardon for attempting alone a work which “did well deserve the conjunction of many heads”, and justifies the lack of “some cooperating advancers” with the “privacy of [his] condition” (1964: 3), which probably refers to his physical isolation from the scientific community.<sup>10</sup> The complexity of his epistemological enterprise would call for a joint effort on the part of the learned community, but, in the absence of cooperation, the very least a researcher can do is to carry out his investigations avoiding presumption and over-confidence. Even the most accurate scholars are not immune from error, and the only guarantee of success is open debate:

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<sup>9</sup> Among seventeenth-century thinkers who were active in England and promoted the reformation of language for the spreading of knowledge, we can mention, besides Francis Bacon, Jan Amos Komensky (Comenius), Samuel Hartlib, John Dury, Thomas Hobbes, Francis Lodwick and John Wilkins. Lodwick published *A Common Writing* in 1647 and *The Ground-Work, or Foundation Laid (or so Intended) for the Framing of a New Perfect Language* in 1652; Wilkins’ *Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* appeared in 1668.

<sup>10</sup> Browne lived and practiced medicine in Norwich from 1637 to the end of his life in 1682. Possibly because of his distance from London, he was never a fellow of the Royal Society. On Browne’s cooperative attitude as inspired by Francis Bacon’s, see Preston (2005).



Lastly, we are not Magisterial in opinions, nor have we Dictator-like obtruded our conceptions; but in the humility of Enquiries or disquisitions, have only proposed them unto more ocular discerners. And therefore opinions are free, and open it is for any to think or declare the contrary. And we shall so far encourage contradiction [...] not to traduce or extenuate, but to explain and dilucidate, to add and amplate, according to the laudable custom of the Ancients in their sober promotion of Learning [...] Ready to be swallowed in any worthy enlarger: as having acquired our end, if any way, or under any name we may obtain a work, so much desired, and yet desiderated of Truth. (Browne 1964: 6)

Apart from the expediency of such a declaration of humility, which obviously performs the function of a traditional *captatio benevolentiae*, the passage is worth quoting because its spirit is maintained throughout the whole treatise. In Book I, at the end of chapter 8 – which discusses the works of a series of ancient and modern writers used as literary sources in *Pseudodoxia* – Browne suggests caution to his reader: even excellent authors can make mistakes, and given the “dubious” nature of his own investigations, he wishes to be read “with caution” as well: “[...] we cannot without arrogancy entreat a credulity or implore any farther assent, then the probability of our Reasons, and verity of experiments induce” (1964: 59).

A few examples of the way in which Browne’s arguments are organized in the singular chapters of his treatise will help clarify his commitment to the pursuit of knowledge as a complex, interrelated, and painstaking process. Undeniably, some passages are convoluted, redundant, and definitely distant from the literary tastes of the modern reader; nonetheless, a combination of the oddity of the objects of inquiry and of the author’s delicate but penetrating irony in discussing his topics renders the encounter with *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* an enjoyable experience, even for amateurs.

In Book III Browne addresses “popular and received Tenents concerning Animals”, and one of his first investigations regards the beaver (chapter 4). The popular belief discussed here maintains that “a Bever to escape the Hunter, bites off his testicles or stones” (1964: 167). I chose to start with the discussion of this error because its treatment is somewhat paradigmatic of the way in which many other chapters are constructed: Browne starts by telling his readers that the tenet under scrutiny is very ancient, that it can be traced back to the hieroglyphics of the Egyptians, and that it was spread both by literary sources and by emblems. He then provides the Greek etymology of the term *Castor* (because some people have erroneously identified a Latin borrowing, “*Castor a castrando*”, 1964: 167), and rejects the fallacious belief on a literary basis, quoting ancient and modern writers against it. Here as elsewhere, Browne is interested in the origins of the tenet, because the way in which an erroneous conceit is formed and handed down to posterity helps him to explain how similar misapprehensions can be avoided. The problem lies, as it often does, in a process of misreading: born as a fable to exemplify a moral, the saying turned into truth “by process of tradition”:



The original of the conceit was probably Hieroglyphical, which after became Mythological unto the Greeks, and so set down by Aesop; and by process of tradition, stole into a total verity which was but partially true, that is in its covert sense and Morality. (Browne 1964: 167-168)

The fable, in itself, may be useful to commend those who, like the cunning beaver, are ready to suffer a loss in order to preserve a greater good (the animal gets rid of his testicles to preserve his life). But – Browne warns his reader – “if any shall positively affirm this act, and cannot believe the Moral, unless he also credit the Fable; he is surely greedy of delusion, and will hardly avoid deception in theories of this Nature” (1964: 168). It is always wrong “to receive Figures for Reality” (168): here Browne is stigmatising a simplifying mental process in the acquisition of knowledge, which disregards the complexity of human language and the different layers of meaning it provides. The belief, moreover, can be proved wrong not only with the help of literary sources and of sound reasoning, but also drawing on direct observation. The anatomy of the animal shows that those parts commonly called “testicles” are instead protuberances which can be found both in the male and in the female, where there is “no derivation of the seminal parts, nor any passage from hence, unto the Vessels of Ejaculation [...] as may be observed in such as are fresh, and not much dried with age” (1964: 168). Browne’s argument on the beaver goes on for a couple of pages, for the most part dedicated to the scrutiny of previous treatises on natural philosophy which, rightly or wrongly, took the erroneous tenet into consideration (the most “inexcusable” of all being Pliny, who confirmed the mistake in spite of testimonies to the contrary). The conclusion of the chapter proves that Browne’s major concern in examining a popular belief is to identify the process at work in the interpretation of received knowledge: those who are able to detect the metaphor under the letter, and use the figure accordingly, are writers whose “language is tolerable” (1964: 170); all the others, who patently go against logic and experience, are guilty of misinterpreting reality and of contributing to the spread of innumerable, deleterious ‘pseudodoxia’.

Having perused an exemplary chapter in some detail, we can now focus on various engaging aspects of other investigations. To remain in the animal realm, the inquiry on the “dubious” existence of the griffin (chapter 11) opens up a discussion on the question of symbols, pictures and emblems, which is so important for Browne that he dedicates an entire book of *Pseudodoxia* to the examen “Of many things questionable as they are described in Pictures” (Book V). The griffin needs a brief introductory description, since its shape is quite odd and, as we shall see presently, unreasonable if compared with the anatomical structure of other animals:

That there are Griffins in Nature, that is a mixt and dubious Animal, in the fore-part resembling an Eagle, and behind the shape of a Lion, with erected ears, four feet and a long tail, many affirm, and most, I perceive, deny not. (Browne 1964: 189)

Browne instead denies it resolutely, not without a previous mention of the many literary sources for and against the notion, from Herodotus to Pliny to Albertus





Magnus. His refusal of error in this case relies principally on the general observation of living beings, that he calls the "Doctrine of Animals": even though there are creatures "of mixed and participating Natures" (1964: 189), yet they are harmoniously constructed, because their bodies are the fruit of a commixtion of elements, rather than an incongruous assembly of the most disparate parts of other beasts. A monstrous invention if taken literally, the figure of the griffin, read correctly as a symbol, becomes "an Emblem of valour and magnanimity, as being compounded of the Eagle and Lion, the noblest Animals in their kinds" (1964: 191). A true knowledge of the griffin, therefore, takes it for what it is, a "symbolical phansie" (191) – which does not mean to diminish its importance or to do away with the notion altogether. Browne concludes the chapter with a learned illustration of the original meaning of the symbol, which for the Egyptians was endowed with a "higher signification" (191); his reader, instead of misinterpreting or ignoring a mythological figure of such prestigious history, had better learn how to interpret the vast portion of knowledge at his disposal, and profit from the apprehension of ancient and ennobling conceptions.

Before abandoning the animal realm in favour of the human, let us briefly mention a last example, concerning "Frogs, Toads, and Toad-Stone" (chapter 13). In this case, apart from the pleasure the modern reader draws from the discussion of an issue like "[whether] a Toad pisseth, and this way diffuseth its venome" (1964: 198), what I find remarkable is the very tone of the argument, which is genuinely dubitative and all but assertive. Browne here seems really uncertain about the correct interpretation of received notions concerning toads and frogs, and goes through the various possibilities in a rambling passage which suggests that he is thinking aloud:

[...] for some doubt may be made whether a Toad properly pisseth, that is distinctly and separately voideth the serous excretion: for though not only birds, but oviparous quadrupeds and Serpents have kidneys and ureters, and some Fishes also bladders: yet for the moist and dry excretion they seem at last to have but one vent and common place of exclusion: and with the same propriety of language, we may ascribe that action unto Crows and Kites. And this not onely in Frogs and Toads, but may be enquired in Tortoyses: that is, whether that be strictly true, or to be taken for a distinct and separate miction, when Aristotle affirmeth, that no oviparous animal, that is, which either spawneth or layeth Eggs, doth Urine except the Tortois. (Browne 1964: 198)

Also on the question of the capacity of frogs to survive only in water without drowning, there are various opinions and no certainty; the issue is debatable, and Browne discusses it accordingly, acknowledging the reasonableness of one hypothesis above another, but leaving the last word to experiment. Honest to the last, he does not hesitate to admit that even experiments sometimes leave us without a conclusive answer:

And because many affirm, and some deliver, that in regard it hath lungs and breatheth, a Frog may be easily drowned; though the reason be probable, I find



not the experiment answerable; for fastning one about a span under water, it lived almost six days. (Browne 1964: 201-202)

Let us now leave the poor frog to its destiny and focus instead on Browne's fourth book, which debates "many popular and received Tenents concerning Man". Among the many subjects treated in this section of *Pseudodoxia*, the discussion of a statement like "That Jews stink" (chapter 10) is particularly engaging, because it entails an investigation both of the customs of the Jews, and of the categorising (mis)habits of the human mind, with particular reference to the misapprehensions of his fellow Christians.

Browne opens his chapter with a resolute denial of the tenet under scrutiny: "That the Jews stink naturally, that is, that in their race and nation there is an evil savour, is a received opinion we know not how to admit" (1964: 297); he accordingly carries on a rational examination of a notion he considers unreasonable in the first place. Browne concedes that animals and plants have certain smells, pleasant or unpleasant; he is ready to acknowledge that, as a species, also humans have an odour. Actually, the problem does not concern either the species or the individual, since "every man may have a proper and peculiar savour" (298) – which, Browne the physician points out, can be extremely unpleasant, according to what the people eat or drink (the "fedor" of inappropriate food reveals itself in sweat and urine). But to ascribe an unsavory odour to an entire "nation" like the Jews is an erroneous conceit that goes against both reason and sense. Here Browne's discussion follows a line of thought which in principle corresponds to our own, even if the ethical aspects of the question, unavoidable for us, are alien to Browne's argument: it is impossible "to fasten a material or temperamental propriety upon any nation" (298) because no nation is "pure", but the result of innumerable encounters with other peoples. This is undeniably the case of the Jews, who are even more mixed than others, "not only in regard of their proselytes, but their universal dispersion" (298). It is therefore logical to deny a tenet that patently contradicts evidence, and which is instead, as Browne explains later on in the chapter, the fruit of the Christians' aversion to the Jews. As suggested above, he is not talking on behalf of the Hebrews; he is not defending a race he does not hesitate to define "nasty" and "sluttish" (301). What Browne is doing here, not without irony, is dismantling a popular belief which is totally unreasonable, if not ridiculous: after all, if they "could be smelled out, would much advantage, not only the Church of Christ, but also the coffers of Princes" (299). In order to demonstrate that accusing the Jews of stinking is even less justified than doing the same with other peoples, he is fair-minded enough to admit that their customs regarding diet and "generation" are purer, healthier and cleaner than those of the Christians. After all, the most obvious point against the popular error he is discussing is simply to acknowledge that it is contradicted by experience: "for this offensive odor is no way discoverable in their Synagogues where many are, and by reason of their number could not be concealed" (301).

When he finally comes to the reason that originated the false assertion under scrutiny, he cannot but recognise that the opinion of the Christians is biased: "Now the



ground that begat or propagated this assertion, might be the distasteful aversness of the Christian from the Jew, upon the villany of that fact, which made them abominable and stink in the nostrils of all Men" (301). The key to understanding the process which gave birth to the fallacious opinion is once more the capacity to detect the figure under the letter, that is the metaphorical meaning of the verb "to stink". The mind of man can be easily deviated from the truth, if he does not make the effort to come to terms with the complexity of human language, without turning figurative expressions into literal constructions. Notwithstanding all the limits of an argument which on the one hand speaks clearly against stereotypes (it is "a dangerous point to annex a constant property unto any Nation", 303), and on the other perpetuates them (he has nothing to say against the metaphorical stench of the Jews), we cannot but relish the perspicuity and argumentative honesty with which Browne denounces – and makes fun of – the human perverted paths to knowledge:

And lastly, were this true, yet our opinion is not impartial; for unto converted Jews who are of the same seed, no Man imputeth this unsavoury odor; as though Aromatized by their conversion, they lost their scent with their Religion, and smelt no longer then they savoured of the Jew. (Browne, 1964: 301)

"Understanding a metaphor in the literal sense" (1964: 271) is the ground of various erroneous beliefs. The tenet "that only Man hath an Erect figure, and apt for to behold and look up toward heaven" opens Book IV (1964: 269); there Browne starts by discussing "Erectness strictly" (269), according to the definition of Galen, and assumes that in that sense the assertion may be true. Yet, if the notion of being erect is taken in its popular meaning, that is as opposed to proneness, it becomes questionable, since there are many animals who are only partially prone – birds in particular being almost erect. Apart from the technical discussion of the first part of the tenet, it is the second assertion – that man's erectness favours his looking up to heaven – which is rejected by Browne in its literal meaning, for "Man hath a notable disadvantage in the Eye lid; whereof the upper is far greater than the lower, which abridgeth the sight upwards; contrary to those of Birds, who herein have the advantage of Man" (1964: 271). A figurative interpretation of the assertion, instead, would easily clarify that Plato's expression "sursum aspicere" has to be intended metaphorically, because man is the only living being on earth who can elevate his thoughts and speculate. It is not easy to detect whether Browne enjoyed writing the following lines as much as we readers take pleasure in receiving them; if there is intentional irony, it is subtle enough to leave the tone of the passage in the balance between an erudite discussion of the creatures that easily look up to heaven and the amused exposition of man's hermeneutic ineptitude:

The ground and occasion of this conceit was a literal apprehension of a figurative expression in Plato, as Galen thus delivers: To opinion that Man is Erect to look up and behold the Heavens, is a conceit only fit for those that never saw the Fish Uranoscopus, that is, the Beholder of Heaven; which hath its Eyes so placed, that it looks up directly to Heaven; which Man doth not, except he recline, or bend his head backward: and thus to look up to Heaven, agreeth not only unto Men, but



Asses; to omit Birds with long necks, which look not only upwards, but round about at pleasure. And therefore Men of this opinion understood not Plato when he said that Man doth *Sursum aspicere*; for thereby was not meant to gape, or look upward with the Eye, but to have his thoughts sublime; and not only to behold, but speculate their Nature, with the Eye of the understanding. (Browne 1964: 271)

Humans, Browne says between the lines, should recognise and cherish their intellectual gift, the speculative faculty – that is, their capacity to theorize and produce complex reasoning. It follows that they should not, as often happens, undervalue their own understanding and disregard the complexity of knowledge acquisition, which inevitably passes through the rhetorical complexity of language. The risk, if they do, is that of perverting not only their apprehension of the world, but also their own beliefs and conduct: faulty hermeneutics brings to corrupt practices in the religious and political field.<sup>11</sup>

As anticipated above, a mention of the political implications of a work which was published in the midst of the English civil wars is the last point I wish to make before concluding, because Browne's epistemological concerns are far from alien to the cultural and political context in which he lived. Thomas Browne was a man in his early forties when he first published *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* in 1646; he had been living in Norfolk for some years, and even if Norwich was not London, the turmoil caused by the military conflict between monarchy and Parliament was clearly perceptible even there. In particular, the ideological disputes that inflamed the English Revolution cannot be overlooked; as Barbour and Preston contend in their introduction to *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, recent critical work helps us to "revisit more productively Browne's relationship to contemporary religious divisions [and] his place in civil-war debates" (2008: 5). Kevin Killeen's *Biblical Scholarship, Science and Politics in Early Modern England* is committed to redressing Browne's traditional image of the isolated scholar who eschews politics and ignores what happens around him. "Browne puts poor interpretation at the centre of his epistemology, and in so doing, he engages one of the most tumultuous cultural battlefields of mid-century England" (Killeen 2009: 10). Killeen believes that the "vulgar sort" and their errors are not necessarily to be understood as the "unlearned and superstitious masses, but rather what Browne considers to be a more dangerous class of the politically and religiously vulgar, whose interpretative habits when they address scripture are endlessly replicated across the cultural landscape of the 1640s" (2009: 2). Among them, the "enthusiasts" – the religious radicals who claimed to be the recipients of the divine spirit – are extremely dangerous in their conviction that the Bible can be interpreted subjectively, doing away with an exegetical competence which requires years of study and application.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely the analogy between "muddled exegetical understanding" (2009: 7) and

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<sup>11</sup> James Dougal Fleming discusses literalism in early modern biblical exegesis, and in particular the "hermeneutic validity" of the literal (2007: 45).

<sup>12</sup> On the 'literal' and the 'figurative' as rhetorical constructs in the radical writings of the English Revolution, see Iannaccaro (2003). It is of course *Religio Medici*, Browne's first published treatise (1643), the work in which he discusses at length the relationship between knowledge, religion and truth.



the “polyphony of error” displayed in natural philosophy and natural history that constitutes, in Killeen’s opinion, the “central imperative in *Pseudodoxia* – to locate corrupt hermeneutic practice as the root of error” (2009: 7). Actually, in Book I Browne denounces the exegetical aberrations of those who are

[...] commonly confined unto the literal sense of the Text [the Scriptures]; from whence have ensued the gross and duller sort of Heresies. For not attaining the deuterocopy, and second intention of the words, they are fain to omit their Superconsequencies, Coherencies, Figures, or Tropologies; and are not sometime perswaded by fire beyond their literalities. (Browne 1964: 27)

In a very different tone, the Presbyterian heresiographer Thomas Edwards had inveighed against the sectarians of his time in *Gangraena*, a treatise in three books published in 1646, just when Browne’s *Pseudodoxia* was printed. The two works are not comparable, because Edward’s volumes are collections of disorganized, repetitive, and sometimes contradictory denunciations of the most disparate versions of sectarianism.<sup>13</sup> In *Gangraena*, invective mingles with the narration of the scandalous, and therefore appealing, practices of people who are accused of respecting no principle whatever, apart from the manifestation of divinity stemming from the ‘Spirit’ that inhabits them. And yet, both *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* and *Gangraena* can be considered catalogues of errors,<sup>14</sup> and engage with the monstrous disposition of those who do not recognize the authority of God, of their betters, and, ultimately, of reason. Both works, each in its own peculiar way, are manifestations of the pervasive feeling of anxiety that characterised the tumultuous years in which they appeared, and both give expression to the need of containing degeneration.

Browne addresses political issues in an indirect way, examining the nature of erudition and the role of correct methods of investigation in the acquisition of true, uncorrupted knowledge. His inquiry, therefore, cannot but deal with the properties of language and the hermeneutic practices of men. Throughout *Pseudodoxia*, he acknowledges and defends rhetorical complexity, which is intrinsic to human communication and cannot be reduced to a superfluous embellishment of discourse, to be used or dismissed like an ornament. It is rather a necessity, a structural feature of the representation of concepts, which in its turn has an indispensable role in the process of attaining the truth. The language in which knowledge is propagated, therefore, must be interpreted by a mind equally ‘complex’ – that is, a mind as sophisticated as the one celebrated by John Milton in *Areopagitica* just a couple of years before *Pseudodoxia* was published. Milton praised the true Christian mind, which can emerge from mediocrity and develop its hermeneutic faculties only through a free access to knowledge, and therefore to reading. Nothing is possible without God’s grace; but, in addition to that incomparable gift, what for both Milton and Browne is

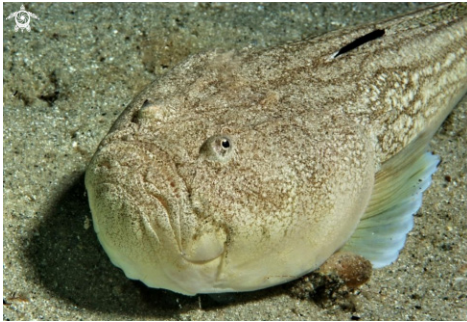
<sup>13</sup> A recent extensive study on Edwards’ *Gangraena* is Hughes (2004).

<sup>14</sup> The first volume of *Gangraena* is entitled: *Gangraena: or a Catalogue and Discovery of many of the Errours, Heresies, Blasphemies and pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this time, vented and acted in England in these four last years [...]*.





urgently needed in a challenging world is a refined and exercised understanding, a mind that can “apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better” (Milton 1644: 12 – sig. B3v).



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